

NEW YORK'S MID-EAST FILM FESTIVAL

INTRO: AN UNUSUAL GROUP OF FILMS WERE SHOWN IN NEW YORK THIS WEEK (THE FIRST WEEK OF JUNE), AS PART OF AN UNUSUAL FILM FESTIVAL THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST FILM FESTIVAL. THE EVENT WAS ORGANIZED BY FAYE GINSBERG AND ILAN ZIV, TWO YOUNG NEW YORKERS, IN COOPERATION WITH THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC CINEMA. VOA'S SHIRLEY SEALY HAS THIS REPORT.

VOICE: THE SPONSORS OF THE FIRST MIDDLE EAST FILM FESTIVAL SAY THEY HAD THREE AIMS IN MIND. FIRST, TO INTRODUCE TO AN AMERICAN AUDIENCE SOME OF THE BEST AND MOST SERIOUS WORK OF FILMMAKERS IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST. SECONDLY, TO BRING TOGETHER SEVERAL OF THOSE FILMMAKERS TO DISCUSS THEIR WORK AND SHARE THEIR PARTICULAR CINEMATIC VISION.

FINALLY, THE FIRST MID-EAST FILM FESTIVAL IS INTENDED TO SHOW THAT THERE ARE MANY ISSUES -- BESIDES THE POLITICAL STRUGGLES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE ARAB NATIONS -- THAT ARE OF VITAL INTEREST TO THOSE WHO LIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

A TOTAL OF THIRTY FILMS WAS SHOWN DURING THE WEEK-LONG EVENT WHICH WAS HELD AT THE BLEECKER STREET CINEMA IN THE GREENWICH VILLAGE AREA OF NEW YORK CITY. THE FULL-LENGTH FEATURES, THE DOCUMENTARIES AND SHORT FILMS WERE GROUPED TOGETHER BY THEME. FOR EXAMPLE, THE FIRST DAY'S PROGRAM FEATURED FILMS ABOUT WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST. SEVERAL OF THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE FILMS WERE MADE BY WOMEN.

VOICE:
(CONT)

LAYLA ABOU-SAIF CAME TO NEW YORK FOR THE WORLD PREMIERE OF HER JUST-COMPLETED DOCUMENTARY CALLED "WHERE IS MY FREEDOM?" WHICH EXPLORES THE IMPACT OF FEMINISM IN HER NATIVE COUNTRY. THE FILMMAKER INTERVIEWED WOMEN ON ALL LEVELS OF EGYPTIAN SOCIETY -- INCLUDING A NUMBER OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN WHO HAD ACHIEVED SIGNAL SUCCESS DESPITE THE LAWS, SOCIAL MORES AND RELIGIOUS SANCTIONS WORKING AGAINST THEM.

0 MARVA NABILI OF IRAN TOOK A MUCH NARROWER, MORE PERSONAL VIEW OF WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A WOMAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST. HER FILM IS CALLED "THE SEALED SOIL" AND MISS NABILI ACTED AS PRODUCER, DIRECTOR, WRITER AND EDITOR -- WORKING IN IRAN WITHOUT OFFICIAL PERMISSION TO DO SO.

Q HER FILM FOCUSES ON A YOUNG WOMAN WHO IS CAUGHT UP IN THE SHARPLY DEFINED, TRADITIONAL WAYS OF A SMALL IRANIAN VILLAGE. SUDDENLY, SHE BEGINS TO REBEL AGAINST LEADING THE LIFE SET OUT FOR HER -- BUT IN THE END SHE FOLLOWS TRADITION. MISS NABILI SAYS THAT IN SOME WAYS, THE FILM'S HEROINE IS LIKE IRAN ITSELF -- IN A STATE OF TRANSITION, NOT SURE OF ITS IDENTITY. "THE SEALED SOIL" WON PRIZES FOR MISS NABILI LAST YEAR AT FILM FESTIVALS IN BOTH LONDON AND SAN REMO (ITALY

A PRIZEWINNER WHO ATTENDED THE MID-EAST FILM FESTIVAL WAS KHALID SIDDICK, THE FIRST AND SO FAR, THE ONLY FILMMAKER IN KUWAIT. HE HAS WON OVER ELEVEN INTERNATIONAL AWARDS FOR HIS THREE SHORT FILMS AND TWO FULL-LENGTH FEATURES, BOTH OF THE LATTER WERE SHOWN LAST WEEK IN NEW YORK. HIS NEWEST FILM -- AND SOME SAY HIS BEST -- IS "WEDDING OF ZEIN," WHICH TAKES PLACE IN THE SUDAN, WITH A CAST OF LOCAL PEOPLE.

VOICE: ZEIN IS KNOWN AS THE SIMPLETON OF HIS VILLAGE, BUT HE IS ALSO SPIRITUALLY GIFTED, WITH A QUALITY WHICH ONE OF THE ISLAMIC PRIESTS TRIES TO EXPLOIT. THE FILM IS DIRECTED WITH GREAT STYLE -- AND SOME HUMOR AND MISTER SIDDICK MAKES A STRONG POINT ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CONVENTIONAL RELIGION AND TRUE SPIRITUALITY.

ALMOST ALL OF THE FILMS IN THE MID-EAST FILM FESTIVAL DEAL WITH SERIOUS AND SOMETIMES DIFFICULT SUBJECTS. FOR EXAMPLE, AN ISRAELI PRODUCTION CALLED "PARATROOPERS" -- BY JUDAH NE'EMAN--TAKES A TOUGH, UNSYMPATHETIC LOOK AT ENFORCED MILITARY TRAINING. THE LEADING CHARACTER IS EVENTUALLY DESTROYED BY HIS INABILITY TO FIND A PLACE IN THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT -- OR IN ISRAELI SOCIETY.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT ISRAELI FILM IS CALLED "WE ARE ALL JEWISH ARABS" -- AND IT REVEALS SOME OF THE ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THE "ORIENTAL" -- OR ARABIC -- JEWS WHO MIGRATED TO ISRAEL FROM IRAN, YEMAN, EGYPT AND OTHER NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES.

THIS POWERFUL DOCUMENTARY WAS PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY IGAAL NIDDAM, AN ISRAELI WHO WAS BORN AND RAISED IN MOROCCO. ARABIC JEWS MAKE UP SIXTY-FIVE PERCENT OF ISRAEL'S POPULATION, ACCORDING TO NIDDAM'S FILM, AND HE FEELS THESE PEOPLE COULD PROVE TO BE EXCELLENT MEDIATORS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND ITS ARABIC NEIGHBORS. "WE ARE ALL JEWISH ARABS" MAKES A PASSIONATE PLEA FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST -- AND IT HAS BEEN WIDELY ACCLAIMED IN ISRAEL AND THROUGHOUT EUROPE.

VOICE: THE MIDDLE EAST FILM FESTIVAL ENDED WITH A SERIES OF FILMS
(CONT) GROUPED TOGETHER UNDER THE LABEL "BATTLE SCARS -- ARABS AND
ISRAELIS."

THE SELECTION INCLUDED "A WALL IN JERUSALEM,"
PRESENTING NEWSREEL FOOTAGE FROM THE YEAR NINETEEN HUNDRED
TO NINETEEN-SIXTY-SEVEN, TELLING THE HISTORY OF ZIONISM --
AND "TO LIVE IN FREEDOM," BY SIMON LOUVISH, A DISSENTING
ISRAELI WHO LOOKS AT THE MODERN HISTORY OF ISRAEL AND ITS
POLICIES TOWARD ARAB CITIZENS.

A SHORT PALESTINIAN FILM ABOUT LIFE IN REFUGEE CAMPS WAS
ALSO SHOWN ON THE FINAL DAY OF THE MID EAST FILM FESTIVAL --
ALONG WITH A SYRIAN FILM CALLED "THE DUPES," ABOUT A FATAL
ATTEMPT TO SMUGGLE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES INTO KUWAIT.

THE HALF-DOZEN FILMMAKERS WHO CAME TO NEW YORK FROM EGYPT,
ISRAEL, IRAN AND KUWAIT TOOK PART IN A SYMPOSIUM AT NEW
YORK UNIVERSITY AT THE END OF THE WEEK. THEIR TOPIC OF
DISCUSSION: CINEMA IN THE MIDDLE EAST -- WHOSE VIEW?"

##

BML/PY